



Khalil Sakakini's Ottoman Prison Diaries

Damascus (1917-1918)

Khalil Sakakini was dragged from his bed in Jerusalem and taken to a Damascus prison by the Ottoman authorities on 5 December, 1917. He was accused of harbouring in his home in Musrara the Hebrew poet, Alter Levine, who was suspected of being an American spy by the Ottoman police. Sakakini was chained to Levine and marched on foot in a gruesome journey that took them to Damascus two weeks later. He was released several months later at the intercession of several friends with Jamal Pasha (al Sagheer), then governor of Damascus, just before the entry of the Arab Liberation Army under the leadership of Prince Faisal.

That journey and the prison experience were transformative for Sakakini's career. It turned him completely against any possibility of reconciliation with the Ottoman regime, and brought him closer to the idea of greater Syria. Immediately after his release, he joined the nascent government of Prince (now King)

Faisal, where he wrote several pamphlets in its favour. While in prison, Sakakini became a champion of idleness as a positive virtue, and he developed many of the ideas later associated with the Vagabond literary group. He also reflected at length on prison life and prison reform, in a section that has been removed for the most part from the excerpts below.

As fate would have it, later research showed that Alter Levine was indeed an American agent, a fact that Sakakini never came to know. He went to his death believing in Levine's innocence.¹ In the 1930s Sakakini heard about Levine committing suicide in Jerusalem. He recalled his long journey on foot to Damascus chained to his friend with great nostalgia, but as far as we know, the two men hardly kept in touch after this episode. (Ed.)

Jerusalem

Monday, 3 December 1917

In the morning I stopped by Izzat Bey at the Governor's office, which is housed in the British archbishop's headquarters, to pick up a travel document, but I didn't find anyone there.

I have no idea why the Ottoman government wants to deport me from Jerusalem. Does it think that the British might need my ilk, someone who is only suitable as a teacher and only happy when busy with my work? Whether the British come or the country remains in the hands of the Ottomans, I will only work in education and will only teach what my conscience counsels. I will not curry anyone's favour, nor will I serve anyone's goals.

At any rate, it does not concern me whether the British come to this country or not, for I have decided that if I survive the war I will travel to America and put my son into school there. And wherever I am, I am simply a human being, nothing else. I don't belong

to political parties or religious factions. I consider myself a patriot wherever I am, and strive to improve my surroundings whether they are American, British, Ottoman or African, whether they are Christian, Muslim or pagan. I only work to serve knowledge, and knowledge has no homeland.

What is a patriot? If being a patriot means to be sound of body, strong, active, enlightened, moral, affable and kind, then I am a patriot. But if patriotism means favouring one school over another and showing one's brother hostility if he is from a different school or country, then I am no patriot.

Yesterday and today silence reigned, as though we are not in a combat zone. Some people fear this calm, thinking that preparations are underway for fierce battles, God forbid.

Damascus

Tuesday, 18 December 1917

When I went to bed the evening of Tuesday, the 27th of November 1917, it was late and biting cold, and cannons near Jerusalem were booming like thunder. Then there was a soft knock at the door, and I opened it to find an American Jew standing before me like a frightened soul seeking refuge.

The government had announced that all Americans between 16 and 50 must turn themselves over within 24 hours, and that anyone who failed to do so would be considered a spy. It had also announced that anyone who intentionally or unwittingly hid an American would likewise be considered a spy. Our friend [Alter Levine]² here had not turned himself over to the government but had fled, and perhaps had knocked on many a door before reaching mine because no one would welcome him in.

And so I was trapped: should I admit him, thus disobeying the orders of my government

and making myself subject to its wrath and vengeance, particularly at a time when it had lost its sense? Or should I send him back to whither he came, thus breaking with the social graces of my cultural idiom, which I became so enamoured of at an early age and which I have committed myself to preserving and indeed strengthening? That humanity infused with a compulsion to shelter those seeking refuge, help those seeking aid, comfort the frightened and respond to those who cry out. If I let him in, I would betray my country, and if I sent him away I would betray my cultural idiom. So which betrayal should I commit?

These thoughts passed through my mind at the speed of lightning, and in the end I did not hesitate to let him in. God forbid I should admit a spy, but the man had fled because it was not a simple matter for him to turn himself over to the government and leave his family and home to the mercies of fate, or to leave at a time when the bombs of the aggressors were raining down on all the roads, making travel dangerous night and day. Who would not listen to his inner voice in a case like that of our friend's and also flee from the government and defy its unpredictable and tyrannical orders? If a crime has been committed, it is to be found in the decree itself, and not in espionage. And if he is not, in my estimation, a spy, then am I a spy if I welcome him into my home?

Yet this does not remove the danger involved should the government learn that he is hiding with me. The government does not give any weight to my opinion, and would not accept any of my excuses.

The man sought refuge with me and I could do nothing other than welcome him in. I said to myself that he is not really seeking refuge with me per se, but rather with my people, as represented in my individual personality. He is seeking refuge in the social graces of my cultural idiom present both prior to and

following the emergence of Islam. He is seeking refuge with the Bedouin who offered sanctuary to the hyena when it sought shelter from its pursuers in his tent, who protected the locusts crawling over his land from those pursuing them to ward off the calamities they cause. He is seeking refuge with 'Aouf bin al-Shibani and al-Samu' al bin Hayan, with the multitude of historical characters who offered shelter to those seeking refuge and helped those seeking aid, even if doing so meant putting themselves in danger. And here I can only say that he bestowed a great honour upon me by seeking refuge with me, because by doing so he deemed me fit to represent the spirit of our history and our cultural idiom in offering shelter to those who seek refuge.

I hope that my people would be pleased that a strange man might seek refuge with them via my persona. His own people rejected him and closed their doors in his face and then I accepted him in the name of us all. The fact is that he is not a spy, and did not seek refuge with Khalil al-Sakakini as he comes to mind but rather with the Arab nation as represented by one of its people. I wasn't about to forego this honour, and I consider myself above belittling the pride of my people or showing disdain for our social customs, even if accepting the honour meant placing myself in danger of execution by hanging or a firing squad.

If I am an aggrieved party, it is not the person who sought refuge with me who is the perpetrator of the offence. Nothing would have been easier than turning him away as his kin did. Rather, the perpetrator of the offence is my cultural idiom, or more precisely, the honour of my people. If offering shelter to someone seeking refuge is a crime, then my entire people should be blamed and not just one of its individuals. Indeed, if this is the case, then our people's books should be burnt, our history blotted out

and the poets and writers from the beginning of our history and to this day expunged. In fact, we should replace our cultural idiom with another and create a new set of morals. We should adopt new and different customs and sing the praises of virtues other than our own.

But may we be raised above that.

Four days after my release I stayed at home and went out very rarely. I believed that I was safe, and that no one would pay any attention to the man who had sought refuge with me. But at three in the morning on Wednesday, 5 December 1917, while I was peacefully asleep, a harsh knock sounded at the door. Who was knocking? Another soul seeking refuge? But this was not the knock of someone looking for shelter. A friend? But this was no time for a visit. The knocking continued. Should I get up and open the door or leave whomever it was to knock until they tired and departed? The knocking continued. Who was it? Someone jumped over the wall. There was the sound of footsteps in the courtyard. They had encircled the house. Weapons rattled. I was certain that they were a military force that knew this man was hiding with me and had come to take us away.

So I leapt from my bed and went to our friend's room and knocked on his door in the hope that I would be able to help him escape, but he did not wake. The soldiers were at the house's inner door and so there was no option other than surrender. I went to the door and opened it to find Aref Bey, a police chief, and an old Jewish woman who had come along to guide them to the house. He said, "Where is Alter Levine?" and I led him to his room. They woke him and took both of us away. I was certain that we were doomed, and so I bade my loved ones a final farewell upon leaving with the policemen and soldiers. But don't ask me to describe what this departure was like for me!

Who was this old woman who had led them to my house? When Alter Levine sought refuge with me, he assured me that no one knew he had come here. We invited him to partake in our meals, but he wouldn't eat more than a little bread, olives and a glass of tea. One day when we were not paying attention, he peered out the window and saw a Jew. He called out to him and had him send that old woman to prepare food for him at once. And so she would come and go every day, until the policeman who was pursuing him noticed her. He asked her about his hideaway and she denied knowing anything, but then he beat her painfully and she confessed and led them to him. And so his people rejected him and then led the police to him.

Why would you not eat from our food? May God forgive you. If our food was impure because it was not kosher, then we too were impure, in your opinion, because we consume impure food. And if that is the case, then how is it that you sought refuge among us?! Religions, or rather, simple minds, how you have wronged us! And how many victims you have claimed!

They took me to the police station in the Dominican building and there I ran into Sheikh Abdel Rahman Salaam, professor of Arabic in al-Salahiya College. They had arrested him so as to send him to Damascus and place him in the Salahiya College there. Since I had transferred there just a few days earlier, I approached him and said, "Professor, you may be the last person I see in this life, so know that I was, until the end, virtuous and upright." He gave me his support and lifted my spirits.

We stayed in the police station for two days. None of the government officials paid any attention to us because they were undergoing tremendous upheaval. That may have worked in our favour, for if they had had time for us, they may have sentenced us and carried out

the punishment so as to vent their anger or act out their vengeance, or so as to terrorize others.

All that happened was that the policemen took my companion and asked him some questions, and then they brought me in and asked me, "Do you know this man?" I said, "Yes," and the police chief looked at me up and down with a stern challenge in his eye and shook his head as if to say, "You double-crossing traitor, you've fallen into our hands now." Then they held a briefing and wrote a long report on me about what had taken place, and also including what hadn't.

Then they transferred us to the military prison in the Russian building, where they put us in a private room with eight others, some of whom were shackled with chains, and barred us from mixing with the other prisoners. We were certain that they considered us major criminals. We stayed in the prison for two days, during which we could see from the windows soldiers fleeing the battlefield, wounded people being transferred to hospital and people running with no thought to others.

The last to visit me were my wife, Umm Sari,³ and my sister, Melia. They came in the evening of my last day alive, or my last day in Jerusalem should fate decree my survival. They stood before the prison window with the war raging around them, bombs dropping here and there, people running around in chaos, soldiers racing by, and fear gripping all. I was frightened for them and pressed them to leave. I still don't know if they made it home safely or if something terrible befell them on their way. I marvelled that they came by themselves, with no companions from among my family or friends, at such a terrible hour. But I said to myself that perhaps they were afraid or had some other excuse and so how could I blame them? Then my most devoted friend, Abu Daoud Henna Yasmina, came to see



Khalil and baby Sari. Source: Sakakini family archives.

me, and when night fell, we slept.

There is no room here to describe the prison we were in, the mental or psychological conditions of our fellow inmates or the discussions we held. However, we understood from our fellow inmates that those who are sentenced with capital punishment are awoken in the night and taken to their execution. As we slept, we heard some clatter in the prison, and then armed soldiers came in and we arose in a panic. We were certain that they had come to take us to be executed. I will never forget that

terrible moment for as long as I live.

Then they bound us with ropes, tying each of our hands to another's - myself and Alter Levine and the eight others: three Turks, an Egyptian, two from the Gendarmes⁴ and two Jerusalemites, one of them called Khalid and the other Yousef al-Shihabi Abu Ribah. I was bound by the wrists to my companion in this disaster, Alter Levine. Our shackle was tight and I felt as though the blood in my hands would erupt. And so I solicited them to loosen the rope a little and they said, "It's fine with us if you die." Then we left the prison and all the other inmates and custodians pitied us. Only after we left did we understand that they were taking us to Damascus and so we were reassured a bit by this and clung to the ray of hope.

We hadn't gone far before we met the commander of Jerusalem. We stood before him in the posture of slaves before their master and he shouted at us, a peal of thunder resounding in the pitch-black night. Then they took us to a prison inside Jerusalem so as to bring along its inmates, and it just so happened that the home of one of us, Yousef al-Shihabi Abu Ribah, was opposite the prison. He started calling for his son, Ribah, in a voice choked with tears. They came to him and he bade them farewell and cried and entrusted his son with their care. We sobbed with him, as though each of us were bidding goodbye to our own family. Thank God that we left without seeing any of our loved ones, for the farewell would have been too much for me or them to bear. And then, as if they were afraid of time getting away, they left those wretched prisoners behind and led us out from Lion's Gate like sheep to the slaughter. As we walked in the dark of night without saying a word, every one of us preoccupied with saving himself, I felt as though we were marching in a funeral procession.

We continued on the road to Jericho, which was crowded with fleeing soldiers and their vehicles and cannons, saying, "We may not have seen the aggressors arriving, but we saw the defenders leaving."

We came across a cave in our path and the head guard issued an order for us to halt, and we stopped. They took us into that cave and said, "Sleep a little here," and our companions immediately lay down on the ground and slept. I was surprised at how someone in these circumstances could sleep. As for my companion and me, we could not sit down because our shackles were so tight. If one of us sat the other would fall on top of him. One of our companions said, "Please sit near me and ward off the cold, for my clothing is very thin." I was extremely saddened by his condition.

Shortly thereafter we got up and continued walking until the sun rose high in the sky and planes soared over our heads. We yearned to be struck down by their bombardments and thus be relieved from this misery and shame. We had arrived at a large boulder and sat in its shade to rest, when along came the police chief and Aref Bey, who had seized me in my home, riding two emaciated horses without bridles or stirrups. Their faces wore signs of shame and meekness. We exchanged glances, and it was as though each was saying, "The two of you cannot gloat over our misfortune, for you are in worse shape than we are." No doubt they wished we had not seen them, so as not to taste their ill luck.

Then we continued walking until we reached Jericho, which was teeming with vanquished soldiers and officers. They couldn't find a place to house us other than a stable on the city limits, and so we sat in the dust, assailed by the odious fumes of the stable. My only concern was to find someone from Jerusalem to entrust with finding us food because I had gone nearly 30 hours without food or drink passing my lips. Too, I wanted to borrow

some money to hold me over until I arrived in Damascus.

Every passer-by turned us a blind eye and a deaf ear. They had every right to do so, in order to not be taken as guilty by association with us. Before long, however, I saw the honourable young man Michael al-Quzaz, one of my students. He was alarmed at the sight of my condition and couldn't help himself from approaching me, not even asking permission. He was on the verge of tears. He brought us some chairs and we sat, and he brought us some coffee, which we drank. Then he brought us fine food and we ate, and gave us some money and a towel and some handkerchiefs. I had left wearing only the clothes on my back, with empty pockets and carrying neither food nor clothing. I asked him for paper and a pen, and wrote home to praise his kindness and raise the spirits of my family.

After some time, Sam'an al-Khouri arrived with a little girl carrying a basket of food. He stood at the door and gave me the basket, encouraging me, and I thanked him. In the morning Michael al-Quzaz came again, carrying another basket of food with enough for all of us for several days. I took it and we walked on, as I reiterated my gratitude for this boy's generosity of spirit.

Before we reached the Jordan River, a group of Bedouin horsemen passed us by in the night. Some of my companions asked for their help, to rescue us, but it was as though they did not hear their calls, for their horses passed us by keeping a quick pace.

We continued walking on the highway, and unsuccessfully tried to convince them to take us on another road. They were afraid of losing their way, or of us encountering Bedouin who might save us. When night fell, we were still a long way from al-Salt, and so our guards decided that we would spend the night in a cave at the base of the mountains

that was used as shelter by the Armenians working the road. They had us climb in to its furthest reaches, crawling on our stomachs, while they slept at the entrance. Our companions thought of fleeing, but we didn't pay them any mind. When we got up in the morning, I gathered the Armenian children together and distributed some small coins among them in the name of my son Sari. When [the guards] looked us over, they found that one of us, Yousef al-Shihabi, had fled under cover of night. Thus we bid him farewell.

Then we walked on to al-Salt. It was a beautiful morning and one of our companions, who was black and from Izmir, started singing. The guards fired rounds into the air for amusement, as though conquering raiders. When we arrived in al-Salt we heard that yesterday they had celebrated the reclamation of Jerusalem. They took us to some falling down and deserted homes and stood guard at the doors. I immediately wrote two letters, one to Ahmed Afandi Abdel Mahdi and the other to my friend Shokry Khalil al-Jamal, because I knew he was in al-Salt. Ahmed had written to me that he would try to rescue me, but we left al-Salt without my seeing him. Perhaps he was not successful, and it was difficult for him to see me in such a condition. As for Shokry, he sent me food, drink, money and clothes, along with a lovely letter in which he wrote that if he made his way back to Jerusalem before me that he would care for my family as his own. I thanked God that I had no lack of munificent friends.

Before sunrise on Wednesday morning, we walked to Amman, where we were put in prison. As we entered, I saw some people I knew and called out to them but they shunned us, all but Mr. Baramki, who works in Amman. He sent a young boy to me who brought us water and everything else we needed. Then we left Amman before dawn

and walked to the station.

We had tread on our feet for four continuous days, and my companion and I shared the carrying of the food basket. My socks had torn on the way and nearly bloodied my feet, and so I pulled them off and wore my shoes without socks.

As we were leaving Jerusalem, our guards, strong Albanians, had only eyed us fiercely. But after the passing of two or three days, we all became like brothers. If all Ottoman soldiers were like those guards, the Ottoman Empire would be more powerful, vigorous and intrepid. They had strong bodies, and wore pride and valour on their faces.

Then we rode the train to Dur'a, arriving in the evening. It was extremely cold and the sky warned of rain. We peered from the train window, hoping to see someone we knew, and I saw Mr. Shokry al-Khoury. I greeted him from afar and beckoned to him, and he returned my greeting but did not approach; perhaps he feared being suspected of something. Then one of my most gifted students passed by, George Khamis. I called to him and he came, and when he saw me in fetters he was horrified and his eyes filled with tears. He asked me what I needed, and then went to get what food and other necessities were available and I thanked him.

We slept on the train that night, and in the morning the train took us to Damascus. We arrived on Wednesday, 14 December 1917, and were handed over to the district commander. We bid our friends the guards a brotherly farewell. Shortly thereafter they transferred us to al-Mu'alaq mosque prison in al-Jabiya Gate in front of the Midhat Pasha market. We spent our first night in a small room, where I was unable to find enough room to sit, let alone sleep. This is the room new inmates are placed in before they are bathed, their clothes are sanitized and they are transferred to detention.

On Saturday morning, they escorted us fettered with metal shackles to the baths. That evening, I had managed to send a message to my most loyal friend, a principled man with fine morals, Mr. Mitri Tadaros, to inform him of my state. He came to the prison in the morning to ask for me and was told that we had gone to the baths. And so he waited for us to come out, and when he saw me fettered with chains he consoled me, lifting my spirits.

In the afternoon, Mitri Tadaros and my distinguished teacher Mr. Nakhleh Zureiq⁵ visited me. When we were students, one of our grammar lessons was this verse of poetry: To suffer at once imprisonment, ruin, longing, exile, and separation from the beloved is too much to bear.

And so when I saw my teacher I said to him, "To suffer at once imprisonment, ruin, longing, exile, and separation from the beloved," and he replied from the other side of the metal bars, "is too much to bear!" as his eyes filled with tears.

Sunday, 23 December 1917 Gregorian

Two people came before noon today and vaccinated all the inmates against smallpox.

No one came to see me other than Mr. Tawfiq Jawhariyah, who visited twice.⁶

Among the prisoners is a venerable old Jewish man, a merchant in Beirut named Musa al-Shtein. They led him to Damascus on the charge of espionage, but he is as innocent of this as the wolf was of Jacob's son's blood. We have shared our meals since he was admitted to the prison. Today they informed him that his papers were transferred to Nazareth and that he would travel there tomorrow. He became resigned and fell despondent, not because he feared the accusation against him but because he is a weak old man incapable of bearing the hardship of travel from place to place and



Damascus 1898: Al-Marjeh Square with the Ottoman Post Office and Victoria Hotel in the foreground. Khalil Sakakini sent letters to Sultana and Sari from this post office after his release from prison. *Source: Sulayman al Hakim photographer, in Badr el Hage, Des Photographes a Damas, 1840-1918, Paris, Marval publishers, 2000.*

prison to prison in these cold rainy days and under these conditions. We were moved by his case. May God hasten our deliverance. May God hasten our deliverance. [...]

Thursday, 27 December 1917 Gregorian

The water is still cut off in the prison and so I sufficed with a brushing down.

It seems that I was in need of a vaccination even though I had smallpox when I was young, as my hand has become infected in the area I was injected. Perhaps my upset stomach is also a result of the vaccination.

We had less food today and I only had tea in the morning until noon when we ate some yoghurt with a little bread.

No one visited me other than Tawfiq Jawhariyah.

One of the prisoners approached me and told me that he is from 'Abwin. I asked him who he knew from Deir Ghassana and he said that he knew Mahmoud al-Saleh and his son Omar.⁷ My eyes filled with tears and I commiserated with this prisoner as if he were a relative of mine. I gave him a few *dirhams*. He had been imprisoned for selling a gun. His name is Hassan Ahmed Dahbur.

Sunday, 30 December 1917 Gregorian

There wasn't enough water today to wash my hands, face and mouth, and so I sufficed with turning my clothes inside out. I discovered a great deal on them, God help me.

Mr. Levine and I sleep on one bed because of the tight space. When he sleeps he stretches out and takes more than his share of the bed. But thank God that we sleep on a bed, for

we have spent many a night sleeping on only a thin scarf on the moist prison floor. Last night I was cold because the cover is very thin. When I sleep I take off my shirt and wear my old one, which is torn, and I wrap myself with my teacher's cloak rather than a nightdress. Then I cover myself with a white blanket. My companion covers himself with my sister's shawl.

Today my face towel was stolen and so I used my companion's. Many things have also been stolen from other prisoners.

We still suffer a great deal with regards to our food. My companion will only eat from Jewish kitchens, and when he requests it he praises it in advance for its cleanliness and the quality of its preparation, as if he only ate food prepared by Jews for these reasons.⁸ At any rate, if food is delivered, I don't eat it except with abhorrence and when forced to do so by hunger. It arrives very late. Today was the earliest day we have eaten, and we ate lunch at around three in the afternoon and the food they sent for all of us was not enough for one. He doesn't think about food unless he grows hungry and I am forced to go along with him, even if I suffer from hunger. And if we sit to eat he acts strangely.

Among the things that he does that I disapprove of is that when he is displeased with someone he generalizes his judgment to the entire community. For example, he doesn't say "thief" he says "thieves," and rather than "murderer" he says "murderers," and instead of "despicable person" he says "those despicable people". As for the Jews, however, although they tried to draw his blood and treated him in the worst way possible, he only sings their praises and speaks of their service to mankind. He aggrandizes them in a way that reveals his hatred for people other than his own. Perhaps he disapproves of many things about me, just as I do of him.

Friday, 4 January 1918 Gregorian

I had thought that this war would come to an end without my being exposed to its horrors. But fate has decreed that my final agony be intense, and surpass anything I had imagined. It is as if fate had overlooked me my entire life only to strike me once with a fatal blow. Every parting other than exile is insignificant and bearable, but I left my loved ones without even being granted a final glance from them. They don't know anything about me and I don't know anything about them. It's as though they have buried me.

Sunday, 6 January 1918 Gregorian

[...]

Jamal Pasha the Younger [or the Little] arrived today.⁹ Zein al-Abdeen Affendi promised to submit the petition [for my release] to him. Hopefully salvation will come soon. Tomorrow is the Eastern Orthodox Christmas and so I hope that God will grant my loved ones patience and peace of mind. If I return home soon, every day will be like Christmas, God willing.

If someone in my circumstances wanted to console himself he could do one of two things - he could take his mind off his present and past and focus instead on his future, building castles in the sky and imagining as much happiness ahead as he likes. Or, he could accept his misfortune in light of others' or view it in relation to the proportions it might have reached, thereby considering it light, and in this manner console himself. But more fitting for a mature, composed, rational, individual is to be honest with himself. [...]

Today I bought a shirt and so now I have two. Tomorrow I will buy another pair of long underwear, a pair of socks, a small face towel and a large bath towel. The water is back on in the prison and I've told myself that I will resume my bathing tomorrow.

Prisoners have nothing to do all day other than sit in bed if they have a bed, or on a mat if they are fortunate enough to have a scrap of mat, or on the ground, or to rest their backs against a wall outside the prison to warm in the heat of the sun if it's a lovely day. Otherwise, there is nothing to do other than walk to and fro in the prison courtyard until their feet tire.

How I need a chair during the day, even a café chair would do, to sit on and smoke my water pipe and read whatever books I have or write down my thoughts. But I don't have a chair, and so I am forced to sit on the edge of the bed and use my knees as a table for writing. I don't write much before my legs go numb and I can no longer move. Despite this I might grow accustomed to these circumstances. But I cannot hold back my tears or stop my heart from being broken.

During the day, we used to take refuge in the mosque where we could read and write on our own. But they forbade us from doing that today and so we sat in the same place where we sleep, surrounded by prisoners. We can't eat without their glances enclosing us. We can neither feed them nor eat ourselves while they are looking on. We can't be satiated while they are hungry. And what's more, they are filthy. They look weak from hunger, filth and a poor standard of living.

Today, with my own eyes, I saw the prisoner who sleeps next to me, and I mean by sleeping next to me that his legs may touch mine in the bed. This prisoner is weak and emaciated; he is nothing but skin and bones. All day long he sleeps, fasting, and when he awakens he stays in bed and wraps himself with his filthy and tattered cover, hovering by the stove. And he is right to do so for the season is bitterly cold and the prison is very large. He lives on rations that are not enough for a child, let alone a grown man. He eats his ration and then sleeps, and doesn't wake up until his next scheduled ration, as though

he were one of those animals that sleep for part of the year and stay awake throughout the other part, or as if he were a resident of the far north who sleeps for the entire winter season. I saw this prisoner with my own eyes search his clothing and pick off lice and throw them nearby. Many of them landed on my bed.

The prison director

The prison director is an illiterate Albanian with a coarse tongue and boorish manners. It is enough to say that he has three sons among the prisoners who were caught stealing. I heard that he told the story of his sons to some people, and said that they had stolen 200 Liras worth from so-and-so's store and spent it all on the devil. Then he said that his sons (and he described them in a way I cannot repeat here) stole this amount and didn't even think to give their father 50 Liras from it. This is the prison director... If it is inevitable, in your opinion, that there be prisons, then at least let the prison director be an exemplar of virtue and uprightness to the prisoners.

Monday, 7 January 1918 Gregorian

Today is the Eastern Orthodox Christmas. I am sure that many of my friends and relatives visited my loved ones on this day and outdid themselves in cheering and entertaining them.

I exercised in the roofed gallery this morning and then bathed well and put on my new shirt, and thus felt wonderfully refreshed. In the afternoon, my new long underwear arrived and I put it on and changed my socks and sent all of my dirty clothes to the laundry.

Shehada Muluk came to me and said that he had seen Jamal Pasha and kissed his hand and spoken of my case, and that he was told to submit a petition and that he would help.

And so I told him to ask Mr. Tadaros to write the petition.

In the afternoon Mr. Badi' al-Sununu¹⁰ visited me and brought a package with four pieces of *qatayif* sweets and a dish of *kibbeh*. He told me that his uncle and my teacher had gone to meet the Patriarch and that they had submitted my petition to Jamal Pasha. Then Tawfiq Jawharia visited me and I gave him my *tarboush* to be ironed. He returned later with al-Nahar newspaper, and then Rustum Bey¹¹ came to visit me and reassure me. Thank God that I am not being neglected. I hope that my loved ones receive from my friends all that I am receiving here.

If you want to know what the prison we were in was like, then imagine a spacious untiled area with a high ceiling and spread with a few ragged mats for the prisoners' beds, that houses up to 150 individuals or more, all side by side. Their days and nights are the same, with no light or fresh air penetrating. Most of the prisoners are poorly dressed and emaciated, and many of them are ill, and so they are intent on keeping the doors and windows closed in fear of the cold. Day and night they smoke and light fires to warm themselves or cook, and their breath mixes with the smoke of the fire and of the water pipes and cigarettes, in addition to other wretched fumes such as that of their cooking and the smoke of marijuana. Then there is the clamour of the prisoners - this one singing, that one playing drums, one loudly arrogant about his youth and another laughing, this one screaming and the other calling out that he wants to sell his clothes. If someone comes to the prison door to ask for one of the prisoners, those standing at the door call his name loudly, the prison ringing out with his name. Too, there is the rattle of chains on some prisoners' hands, feet and necks, not to mention other wretched and miserable sights.

Tuesday, 8 January 1918 Gregorian

No one visited me yesterday or today and I don't know what's happened. The fact that I am cut off from my loved ones makes imprisonment easier for me, for whether I remain in prison or am released it is the same. The freedom that was my primary demand has become, in my view, secondary, and my primary demand is to return to my loved ones. Anything else is secondary.

On the contrary, freedom is what I wish for now, for my release from prison is not complete freedom. What is the use in being freed from prison if I still can't return to my loved ones? In such case, my freedom would be a failure, for whether I was released from jail or remained imprisoned I would still not be liberated. If I complain now, it is not of prison but of my separation from those dear to me. If I were able to contact them and we could hear each other's news, than my condition would be more favourable.

Wednesday, 9 January 1918 Gregorian

[...]

Today Sheikh Abdel Qader Afandi al-Musaghar visited me for the first time and brought me the good news that they will summon me today to formally question me on my case and then set me free. After a short while, they took me to the site commander and from there sent me to the office of Jamal Pasha. They asked me about my case and I told them, in short, that the government in Jerusalem had ordered the deportation of American nationals in Jerusalem. Some of them came forth, but the majority didn't. And it so happened that a neighbour in the house we live in was an American national and he was among the majority that did not follow the government's orders. The police came in the evening of 4 December 1917 Gregorian and took him from the house, and took me with him because they thought that



Khalil Sakakini with his sister, Melia, and Musa Alami, years after Khalil's Damascus adventure. *Source: Sakakini family archives.*

he was hiding with me, but the truth is as I am telling you. I am not the landlord. This man had rented some of the rooms in the house from the landlord while I was being held in the police station and [...] I did not make any effort to seek this man out and I did not see him for I was busy welcoming my family and relatives who came to visit that day to ask after me. I knew that a Jewish man from Jerusalem had rented some of the empty rooms while I was away but I did not know that he was American, for the Jews in our country are simply known as Jews. There was no time to ask about him or to meet him because the police came on the second day following my release from prison. He was hiding in his home and not mine, and if anyone is responsible it is the landlord. At any rate, I did not know that he was American.

This is what I told them and since it was evening they postponed the case until the next day. When I was in the commander's

office, I ran into Musa Afandi al-'Alami¹², and an interesting situation took place. He told me that he is travelling tomorrow to Constantinople and promised me to write via Switzerland to my home and reassure them of my well being. He gave me five Liras in notes and a riyal worth of small coins. He apologized for not being able to offer more, and I thanked him profusely. This kindness is a prime example of the generous spirit of Muslims in our country and a source of my admiration for their manners and praise for their compassion.

I haven't encountered such moral standing in but two or three Christians. Most Christians are rogues with no morals at all. If I lived in this country, I would only have a relationship with two or three of them, or might just leave the company of Christians and fall in with the Muslims. I consider myself above being included among those rogues. When in the East, be Muslim, and when in the West, be Christian.

Simply be on the refined side. I will spell out my thoughts on this matter in a compelling essay, if God wills it. I returned to prison to await the coming day, and by strange coincidence I felt from morning that my release was imminent, as I mentioned in the beginning of this diary entry. Before noon the good news of my release arrived, and this was the first time that I was the recipient of divine inspiration.

Thursday, 10 January 1918 Gregorian

After bathing with cold water in the roofed gallery, I prepared to go to Jamal Pasha's office. At nine I went accompanied by a guard, but not chained, thank God, only to find that Jamal Pasha had not yet arrived. And so my accompanying guard and I walked back and forth on Jamal Pasha The Great Street. I was lost in thought, and ran into many of my friends, all of whom were greatly concerned with my case.

I understood that Khalil Bey, the legal advisor, had written of me in his report that I should be released on bail until my papers are returned because they hadn't found anything on questioning me that warranted imprisonment. All that was left was to give the report to Jamal Pasha to be signed and then send it to the district commander and I would be liberated.

I waited until afternoon and Jamal Pasha did not show up and so I returned to prison. My friends had promised me that the matter would be settled today before Jamal Pasha was to travel to Dur'a. I paced back and forth before the prison door, saying to myself, "They are coming now, they will be here shortly," until night fell and I gave up all hope of leaving this evening. Tomorrow is Friday and the following day Jamal Pasha will travel and there was no hope of leaving until he returned from Dur'a, and that could be weeks away. I was dejected and overcome with despair. They had flagged hope before

me from afar and then concealed it from me, when slivers of hope are not easy to come by. Imprisonment was harder on me that night than any other.

While I was in this state, I was summoned and went to the commander's headquarters where Mr. Tadros and Mr. Jurgi Tarazi were waiting for me. They had stipulated that the person who bails me out be from Damascus, and since it was evening it was necessary to entrust Mr. Tadros with that. He responded immediately and I thanked him profusely for his generosity.

I was released and left with Mr. Tadros and since it was dark we bumped around randomly. Mr. Tadros and his family were overjoyed at my release as if I were his brother. He bought sweets along the way in celebration of my freedom. The kindness I encountered from his wife when I entered the house nearly brought tears to my eye. Then my teacher and Khairy Afandi al-Farran came and we exchanged kisses. As soon as I entered Mr. Tadros' home I was bombarded with memories of the day we visited them in Jerusalem, Sultana, Sari and myself. I imagined Sultana sitting next to me and Sari moving before me. Oh, oh, oh, what bad luck I have!

Monday, 18 February 1918 Gregorian

I dreamt that I was in Jerusalem and of my tremendous joy at seeing my loved ones. After completing my daily routine I visited my teacher and then went into town, where I visited Sheikh Abdel Qader Afandi al-Musaghar, and then stopped by my companion, Mr. Levine. He complained to me about his prolonged imprisonment and I felt bad for him. Then I returned to my teacher's room and had lunch there...

Today is the end of my month in my room and the landlady's treatment has made me think of getting another. I went into town

again, to the teachers' meeting place to visit Rustum Bey, but I didn't find him. I visited Zein al-Abidin Afandi because he is ill, and he read me some lines from a letter he received from Musa Fidi Afandi al-Alami dated 2 February in which he asked him to inform me that he had written to my loved ones via Switzerland and that Mr. Alfonse Alonzo¹³ wrote on the same day via Mr. Clark in Switzerland.

I had tea with him and then went out and bought a pair of socks. I ran into Mr. Tadros and Mr. Farid Knizovich¹⁴ on their way home. Mr. Farid took me to show me a room ready to rent, and when we entered and he introduced me to them, a girl approached me and asked me about my sister, Melia. I trembled like a bird shaking off drops of water, and asked her if she knew my sister. She said how could she not know my sister when they were colleagues at school and had spent four years together? Then she introduced herself as Miss Afifa Shatahi. I asked her for her school photographs and she brought them out, and when I saw my sister, Melia, my eyes filled with tears. I agreed to rent a room from them for four riyals a month, but the room won't be available until Thursday, and so I will stay in Mr. Tadros' home until then.

In the morning I encountered Mr. Antoine al-Sakakini and asked him if he knew of a place where I could find a room to live in and he took me to his house and offered his room to me, but I would prefer to live in the Shatahi home because I will have more freedom in a strange house. I ran into the Archmandrite Timotaus on the street and he asked me to visit him tomorrow morning. I had dinner with Tawfiq al-Malak in my room and then he gathered his clothes and went to his new room and I felt terribly alone.

Tuesday, 19 February 1918 Gregorian

The hairdresser came to me today and cut

my hair and shaved me and I paid him half a *mejidi* for last month and ten *metlikat* for this time. Then I bathed and went out and prepared a breakfast of stewed chickpeas and halva. Prices are very high, and I don't know how I will manage to go on if conditions stay the same. Day and night as I walk the streets I see mothers carrying children and begging from passers-by. Despite the poverty of my country I can't help but put my hand into my pocket and give them whatever I am able...

I visited the Archmandrite Timotaus and he gave me ten Liras in banknotes. The total sum of that which I have received from him, either directly or through my teacher, is 30 Liras in banknotes and 21 riyals in coins. Then I went into town and visited Sheikh Abdel Qader Afandi Musaghar and then I visited Rustum Bey and he promised to visit my teacher with some other teachers. I ran into Mr. Nakhla Tarazi on his way from Beirut and we exchanged kisses. In the afternoon Rustum Bey, my teacher, Sheikh Abdel Rahman Afandi Salaam, Ilias Afandi Shadiaq, Mitri Afandi Tadaros and Mr. Dusti visited and spent time interpreting verses from the Qur'an. I abstained from the discussion because I don't see anything more useless.

Sunday, 24 February 1918 Gregorian

[...]

I went into town and stopped by Mr. Levine to inform him that he would be released in two or three days, as I heard from the Spanish Consul. Then I visited Rustum Bey and we strolled a bit along Jamal Pasha Street and then I went to the home of Mr. Tadaros and came upon some visitors. We chatted about how married couples resemble each other in their features after a long marriage, to the point that a wife might appear to be her husband's sister. There is nothing strange in this, for they copy each other's smile, movements and expressions of anger,

sadness, joy, concern and otherwise. This is the secret to the likeness between parents and children, beyond the resemblance in their face, skin, hair and figure. With time they also acquire the other features. For example, a son will laugh like his father or mother and imitate their expressions of joy and anger and so on. The discussion brought us to the total resemblance between Umm Sari and myself, to the point that many people think she is my sister and not my wife. [...]

This gathering reminded me of our gatherings in Jerusalem when I would sit at my table before my books and papers, at my side Abul Fadl and other intellectuals. Oh how I miss those gatherings! When the group split up, I passed by my companion Levine and told him that he would likely be released in two or three days, God willing. Then I went to my teacher's room and we had lunch and decided to visit the Coptic archbishop. On our way we ran into Ilias Afandi al-Shadiaq and he came with us. We leapt from one topic of discussion to another until we lighted on the issue of the splits within the church into the various sects of Christianity. Everyone expressed his opinion on the matter, and some said that the church's split into numerous sects was derived from a love of leadership, while others said that it came from a love of independence. Others said that these splits are shameful to the church. While it is possible that the division comes from a love of leadership or independence, I believe that natural inclination plays a role. While Christianity is a single religion, people vary from region to region, and just as they differ in customs, food, manners, mindsets and social mores, so it is natural for them to differ in their religious characteristics. [...]

We spent the evening in Mr. Tadros' home - myself, my teacher, Mr. Torsian and Mr. Akub from the Austrian Consulate in Jerusalem. The subject of our discussion was setting aside Saturday or Sunday as

a day of rest. Some argued that it is a duty not to work on that day, regardless of the circumstances, but I disagree. Yes, we must refrain from working one day of the week, and a people that rests for at least one day per week is better fit than others, but even this is not to be taken absolutely. There are numerous exigencies that may force one to work on Sunday, and that does not imply that such a person has sinned. The aim in resting one day of the week is, first of all, to rest the body and fully recuperate. Second, it is to take control of one's desires and abstain from greediness. But if one is obliged to work on Sunday to meet one's family's needs but without greed, then there is no problem. Work is holy if it is stripped of greed. If we wanted to create a new law for mankind, then we should limit work hours, and not only forbid working on Sunday but also at night, except for unavoidable circumstances. In sum, we should understand the spirit of the law, and not limit ourselves to the letter of the law. It is said that the letter kills, but the spirit revives.

Free at Last - My Room in Damascus

(Source: *Kadha Ana Ya Dunia*, pp131-132)

2 February 1918 (excerpt)

Damascus is teeming with immigrants and exiles from all corners of the country, leading the people to rent out some of their furnished rooms as they do in Europe and America. Prices have soared dramatically and you might have to knock on many a door before you find a room that is free. Among the oddities here is that they prefer bachelors over married men. I have heard that if asked many of the married men say that they are not married. Many men and women have recommended that I deny that I am married, but I consider myself above that.

I would have liked to have lived in a hotel

or to have agreed with two or three of my friends for us to take a house together and live there by ourselves so as to avoid seeing anyone or having anyone see us fleeing the flattery of ladies and girls, but I did not succeed in this. At last, I found a furnished room in the home of an old woman who lives there with her daughter. In the room across from me lives a military doctor called Ahmed Nour Eldin Bey. My room looks onto the street and the sun comes in from the east in the morning and from the west in the afternoon. It has a bed, a stool and table with a mirror and another table for writing with two chairs. The floor is covered with a mat and the room is lit with electricity. I can only thank the owner of the home and her daughter, for ever since I moved in they have hastened to meet my needs. They make tea and coffee for me. They are both simple in comparison with the women and girls of Damascus.

I rise in the morning and drink coffee and smoke and write and read the daily copy of *al-Sharq* and *al-Muqtabas* newspapers. Then I open the windows and do all of my exercises, and then bathe well as is my habit. After bathing I take my breakfast, and then drink tea and smoke until the afternoon. Then I go out and either visit the people with the Red Crescent or my teacher Nakhla Zariq, or go into town and visit Rustum Bey Haydar. At four or five I return to my room. In the evening I visit Mitri Tadros or Shokry Afandi al-Faran, and sometimes we drink a little *araq*. Most nights I retire to my bed early.

Translated by Jennifer Peterson.

Endnotes

¹ I rely here on research undertaken by Anton Shammās in the State Department archives, that will appear in Shammās's introduction to the second volume of the Sakakini diaries (forthcoming, Khalil Sakakini Centre and the Intitute of Jerusalem Studies, 2004). See also

Tom Segev, *One Palestine Complete*.

² The reference to the Hebrew poet Alter Levine will be clarified in the same diary entry below.

³ Sultana Abdo. Sakakini married Sultana in 1912 after five years of courtship, and against the opposition of the Orthodox Church, since she was a distant cousin of his.

⁴ Gendarmes: It is not clear from the diary whether Sakakini refers here to the soldiers who were guarding them, or to soldiers who were being punished for deserting military service.

⁵ Nakhleh Zureiq was a distinguished Syrian-Lebanese immigrant to Ottoman Palestine, and the most influential teacher of Arabic literature and language in Sakakini's early education in Jerusalem.

⁶ The brother of musician Wasif Jawhariyah, and a family friend from Jerusalem. Tawfiq was serving in the Ottoman army in Beirut, and escaped from service soon after his encounter with Khalil.

⁷ Mahmoud and Omar al-Saleh al-Barghouti (father and son) were both the Sheikhs of Deir Ghassaneh. Omar was earlier a student of Khalil in the Dusturiyah school as is narrated in his autobiography, *al-Marahel* (Beirut: 2001).

⁸ It was Alter Levine's insistence on eating kosher food that brought the attention of the Ottoman police to his presence in the Sakakini residence.

⁹ An Ottoman district commander in Damascus. Not to be confused with Jamal Pasha the Great (*al Kabeer*), also known in Arabic as the Butcher (*al Saffah*), who was the commander of the Fourth Army and the head of Ottoman troops in the Syrian and Egyptian fronts.

¹⁰ Badi' al-Sununu was distantly related to Khalil through his cousins, the Farradj family in Jerusalem.

¹¹ Rustum Bey Haydar, Syrian statesman and essayist.

¹² Musa al-'Alami was one of Khalil's most beloved students in Jerusalem. He went on to study law in Cambridge and became a close associate of the Higher Arab Committee. After the war in 1948, he headed the Arab Development Project for Palestinian refugees in Jericho.

¹³ Alfonse Alonzo belonged to the Italian Jaffa family Alonzo, close friends of the Sakakinis in Jerusalem.

¹⁴ Knizovitch's family was an Orthodox Serb family that settled in Palestine and became related by marriage to the Sakakinis.